

**Predator on the Loose:  
An Evaluation of the Female Serial Killer  
With a Case Study on Aileen Wuornos**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Brown', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ball State University  
Muncie, Indiana

December 5, 2008

Expected Graduation Date  
December 2008

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Abstract

A new predator is on the loose. Today, female serial killers exist in growing numbers and their influence is strongly felt within this country. The following is a comprehensive study of this new breed of killer that has emerged. I will present a brief history of the genre before moving on to discuss demographic data and behavioral characteristics. I will then evaluate psychological factors and probable motives before discussing the actual perpetrations of the crimes. I drew information from the literature in order to develop a typology for female serial killers and provided examples of each. Next, media portrayal of the female multicide will bring to a close the first portion of the examination. Finally, I will conclude with a special case study on one of the most famous female serial killers in history thus far, Aileen Wuornos. I will discuss how she fits into the typologies I proposed in this Honors Thesis.

Acknowledgements

-I would like to thank Dr. Michael Brown for advising me throughout this project. His guidance and help did not go unnoticed.

-I would like to thank everyone who laboriously read and re-read this project at my request. Without all of their input and encouragement, this project would not have been possible.

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HONRS 499  
December 5, 2008

For most people, murder is an unfathomable act. How does one take the life of another living person? Even more perplexing however, is the thought of a person taking more than one life, earning themselves the label of a serial killer. By simplest definition, a serial killer is a person who murders three or more people over a period of time (Holmes & Holmes, 1998, 1). The time frame is what typically distinguishes serial murder from mass murder which is often accomplished at one time. Though intensely studied, much is still unknown about the phenomenon of serial murder as it has only been considered “a major social concern within the past [40] years (Holmes & Holmes, 1998 vii). Already though, what we think we know is constantly changing.

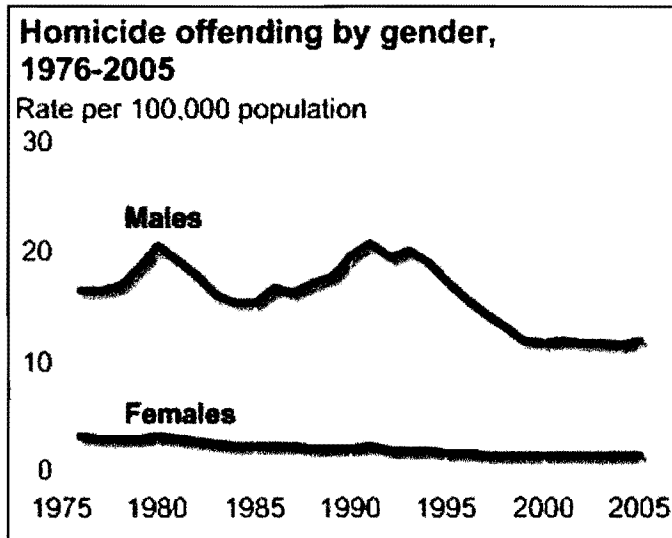
At the time we began studying serial murder, there were no recognizable female serial killers. By and large, the perpetrators were male and the victims’ female. Today, however, the presence of this new predator is growing. The following is a comprehensive examination of the latest breed of killer. Some of the topics explored will include the behaviors of the female predators, possible psychological motivations, and a look at how the media is portraying this latest phenomenon. In closing, there will be a case study of one of the most famous and perplexing female serial killers in history, Aileen Wuornos.

### Literature Review

Many have credited the women’s liberation movement of the 1970’s with the increased trends in overall crime by women (Jenkins, 1994, p. 40). An alternative hypothesis may be that the women’s liberation movement of the 1970’s increased the study of female crime trends among women overall, thus drawing more attention to the issue. First, it is important to look completely at the homicide rates for both men and women. Table 1 represents the homicide rate per 100,000 population since 1976 based on the gender of the offender. “Homicide as defined

here includes murder and nonnegligent manslaughter which is the willful killing of one human being by another. The general analyses excluded deaths caused by negligence, suicide, or accident; justifiable homicides; and attempts to murder” (Greenfield & Snell, 1999, p. 4).

Table 1



*Note.* From the FBI, Supplementary Homicide Reports from 1976-2005 as compiled and published by the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics website

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/tables/osextab.htm>.

According to Supplementary Homicide Reports collected by the FBI in 1976, there were 16.3 murders committed by men per 100,000 people in the population. In comparison, there were only 3 murders committed by women per 100,000 people in the population. These figures are calculated by dividing the total amount of homicides committed by each gender by the total population. The calculation is then multiplied by 100,000 to produce a manageable rate figure. The FBI’s Supplementary Homicide Reports totaled 17, 057 homicides were committed by men as compared to 3,295 homicides committed by women.

According to Supplementary Homicide Reports collected by the FBI in 2005, there were 11.9 murders committed by men per 100,000 people in the population. In comparison, there were only 1.2 murders committed by women per 100,000 people in the population. The FBI's Supplementary Homicide Reports totaled 17,301 homicides were committed by men as compared to 1,826 homicides committed by women.

As can be seen in Table 1, this is a greater number overall and wider fluctuation in the number of homicides committed by men. However, women do represent a statistically significant portion of all murderers. Although the rate has declined overall, there was a time in 1980 when women were responsible for 3,598 murders in the United States or 3.1 murders committed per 100, 000 people in the population as revealed by the FBI Supplementary Homicide Reports.

Despite an overwhelming amount of statistics on gender-related homicide, serial murder does not comprise a statistically significant proportion of the overall homicide rates. Eric Hickey (1997) maintains that there are typically between 50-75 serial killers operating in the United States at any given time. Of that number, 7-8 of them are female. The following table is a recreation of a table published in Eric W. Hickey's *Serial Murderers and Their Victims 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.* published by Wadsworth Publishing Company in 1997 as part of the Wadsworth Contemporary Issues in Crime and Justice Series. The table was calculated from independent research data collected on behalf of the textbook writers and researchers from both the first and second editions.

Table 2

Number of Cases of Serial Murder Committed  
by Females in the United States, 1826-1995

	<b>Total number of cases</b>	<b>Number of cases per year</b>	<b>Number of offenders</b>	<b>Percentage of offenders</b>	<b>Percentage of offenders per year</b>
Years					
1826-1995	59	.35	62	100	.20
1826-1969	31	.22	33	53	.23
1970-1995	28	1.08	29	47	1.10

*Note.* From Hickey (1997). The table was calculated from independent research data collected on behalf of the textbook writers and researchers from both the first and second editions *Serial Murderers and Their Victims*.

Table 2 contends that there were 59 cases of female serial murder between 1826 and 1995. Of those 59 cases, there were 62 total female offenders which accounted less than 1 offender per year (.2). In order to bring the chart into a more current view, it was broken down into two sets of intervals, the time between 1826 and 1969, and the time between 1970 and 1995. From 1970 to 1995, there were only 28 total cases of serial murder with 29 total female offenders. The average number of offenders for that time period then equals 1.1 female offenders per year. This number, though still very low, is significantly higher than the .20 number of female offenders from 1826-1995.

The tyranny of small numbers represented by Table 2 lends itself to why there is much to learn regarding this female phenomenon. Kelleher and Kelleher (1998) assert, "...the very

concept of such a criminal seems to have been turned aside by a strong cultural bias that denies her existence” (p. xi). The act of female murder is a curious one indeed as it is not unusual for women to be viewed as incapable of murder due to a number of presumed gender-related characteristics. Historically, women have been viewed as the weaker sex. Their care-giving nature and overall perceived vulnerability in society by and large leads us to question their capabilities for violent offenses. What has been discovered, however, is that the motives, in addition to behavioral and psychological explanations of why women kill, most often differ from those of men and there are trends that can be found among the female serial killers. Their victim selection and murder methods show commonalities. In addition, Schurman-Kauflin (2000) contends that:

...thought patterns and background factors (childhood) influence the lives and ultimately the crimes committed by women who evolve into multiple murderers. That is, it is suggested that lifestyle and cognitive variables are positively related to repetitive and focused violent behavior. (p. 53)

Most women are in their 20's or 30's during their first kill. The average length of time between the time they begin their spree and the time they are apprehended is five or more years (Hale & Bolin, 1998, pp. 37-38). Dr. Schurman-Kauflin (2000) addresses several of these same female characteristics but in relation to men. Her assessment lowers the number of victims and total killing time in comparison to males. Meanwhile, she adds years to the average age of the female killer in comparison to males. These differences, she states, are reason to fear female serial killers even more than their male counterparts (p.15).

The average number of victims for a female is 17. This is a number most often accomplished by women acting alone and is overall, higher than the average total killing of a

male serial killer. Those women who act alone tend to use less violent means of killing than those who act with a partner as well (Hale and Bolin, 1998, p. 55). The most popular method of killing is a lethal dose of poison, but strangulation and the use of a firearm were also well liked by many (p. 38). Family members and children are the most common victims for female multiple murderers and Holmes, Hickey, & Holmes (1998) describe the women as “geographically stable” because their killing area is more limited than their “geographically transient” male counterparts. Holmes, Hickey, & Holmes (1998) hypothesize this has to do with the traditional home-centered role of the female in history (p. 64).

In addition to the mannerisms displayed during the time of the murders, there are other patterns which have emerged regarding the psychological explanations for why a woman might become a serial killer. In short, there are common ways to answer the “Why?” question using both biological features and behavioral characteristics most often developed from childhood. Moreover, assessing these patterns helps us to understand the motives and the typology of female killers.

While some researchers have used biological theories such as genetics and the labeling theory to gain insight and explanation into female serial killings, the most productive research has taken a psychopathic approach. A psychopath is identified with having a mental disorder which disturbs the activities of the brain in some way (Schurman-Kauflin, 2000, pp. 31-36). Some may be more severe than others may, but this is not to say that they are insane. Insanity is a mental disorder in which a crime is committed as a direct result of the combination of the *mens reus* (the ability to intend the act and fully appreciate the value of the act including its consequences) and the *actus reus* (the ability to act) (Ramsland, 2006, p. 54). In order to claim insanity as a legal defense, a number of tests are used within the American court system, the



most popular being the McNaughten Test which tests the ability of the offender to generally distinguish between what is right and what is wrong (Hickey, 1997, pp. 51-52). In contrast, a psychopath is believed to have more control. Overall, they understand the murders and the consequences but feel little to no remorse. They focus on feelings of omnipotence, lust, rage, glory, profit, etc. which are heightened by higher levels of anxiety. Although this is not the only biological explanation for serial murder, it is the most common (Schurman-Kauflin, 2000, pp. 31-36).

There are several behavioral characteristics associated with multiple murderers. Many of them are developed from childhood and progress in severity over time. Research has proven the importance of having a stable home life during childhood. It is in those young, tender years that children develop such important traits as autonomy, security, and trust. Without an equal and healthy balance of these traits, Dr. Schurman-Kauflin (2000) believes the process of maturation can be retarded and thus damage the female child in three ways (pp. 67-69). First, physical abandonment most damages a child. Without a parent around, the young girl has little to no guidance. Without anyone to trust, she has no one to learn from and may develop strange habits not practiced by other children. Likewise, emotional abandonment may hurt the child's self-esteem and also cause lack of trust in others (Schurman-Kauflin, 2000, pp. 69-71). Second, residential instability takes away the opportunity for young girls to develop lasting friendships with peers. Without others to model behavior after, she becomes sheltered and thus her view of the world may be skewed in many ways. In addition the child may develop depression or feelings of worthlessness because she feels she is unable to develop relationships with others. Finally, early abuse sets the tone for similar behavior later in life. Children who are abused often

develop anger and distrust which causes them to repeat the actions later in life. (Schurman-Kauflin, 2000, pp. 72-74.)

Further results of such childhood afflictions are behaviors which tend to be more predictive of deviant behavior to come later in life. Some behaviors such as smoking or early promiscuity may go unnoticed in the grand scheme of things (Schurman-Kauflin, 2000, p. 131). Other behaviors, however, such as cruelty to animals and petty theft, could be clear signs of trouble to come (Schurman-Kauflin, 2000, pp. 119-121). It is not to say that any of these behaviors alone might lead a child to become a serial killer or that we should assume these characteristics make any and every person unstable enough to commit such egregious acts, they are simply commonalities which have been discovered in the backgrounds of female multiple murders.

Most women, who go on to become serial killers, participated in a number of unhealthy habits during their adolescent years. Smoking, drinking, and high levels of promiscuity were recognizable attributes of many of the women. A general feeling of lack of self-worth is described as the common reason why many women got involved in such age inappropriate behaviors early on. Perhaps looking for a caregiver figure in their lives, many of the women admitted their sexual partners were over the age of twenty while they averaged only fifteen years of age (Schurman-Kauflin, 2000, p. 131).

Most female serial killers have low levels of education and low levels of aspiration towards tangible goals in life (Hickey, 1997). Several of the females' pasts are riddled with truancy records (Dr. Schurman-Kauflin, 2000, p. 130). A combination of feelings of worthlessness and a perceived inability to succeed is what inhibits the learning skills most (p. 24). In addition, feelings of not being able to fit in with peers also hindered much of the

socialization process during the schooling years of the female multiple murderers. Several women developed poor communication skills as a result of their inability to learn (pp. 124-125). “They could not find the appropriate words to express themselves, and they also reported that this inability to articulate their feelings caused significant emotional distress... This reinforces, to the killers, the notion that they are different from others. Once more, anger increases as does aggression” (p. 124).

Dr. Schurman-Kauflin (2000) notes cruelty to animals is one of the most recognizable effects of child abuse and almost always an excellent predictor of aggressive behavior later in life. Feeling victimized from a parent, most often, the female will seek out a small animal, predator-style, in order to transfer emotional or physical pain she might be feeling onto another living thing. Most often, the victims are cats as they are “easy to catch and typically could not injure the woman” (p. 123). Moreover, selecting an animal not likely to injure is similar to the way many female serial killers choose victims they believe to be helpless as well. Females are also less likely than males to torture the animal first, but several women have reported doing so (Dr. Schurman-Kauflin, 2000, pp. 119-124).

A final, interesting, and perhaps less obvious characteristic noted among female serial killers, is that they often have sleep dysfunctions. Sleepwalking, night terrors, and nightmares are a common reaction to an assessed fear of the night. In addition to fearing the nighttime however, they also fear the inability to rest. Somewhat of a double-edged sword, the sleeping process is rather fickle then. Many of the women say the sleeping problems that plagued them at the time of their killings were problems they had experienced since childhood. The irregular pattern of sleep, in combination with the disturbances (nightmares about being abused were common) caused the women great stress (Schurman-Kauflin, 2000, pp.126-128).

### A Female Serial Killer Typology

So now, how do these women do it? Collectively, the genre of serial murder is capable of instilling fear in even the self-proclaimed toughest characters. Furthermore, each defined murder typology can trigger different reasons for fearing it over another. Male serial murder is most often classified based on the typologies proposed by Ronald Holmes and James DeBurger (1998). In order to classify females, they simply modified their typology to reflect gender differences (Holmes, Hickey, Holmes, 1998, p. 65). Many researchers have accepted the classification of female serial killers based on the level of organization in planning and performing the murders (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998). However, there are other characteristics to acknowledge when categorizing the female typologies.

With careful analysis, I categorized female serial killers into different typologies. The typologies are based on the perpetration of their murders coupled with their own personal histories and psychological motivations which, as explained above, often account for their actions. In my analysis then, there are three broad and distinctly different types of female serial killers which I have identified based on the classifications and nomenclature established by Michael D. Kelleher and C. L. Kelleher's 1998 work *Murder Most Rare*. It is interesting to note, this very classification system seems to stem directly from evidence regarding the presumptions already established above about the female character versus the male character.

The first category I have provided, the "tiptoe" killers, contains labels which are rarely associated outside the female sex. There is a certain tranquility about some female killers who retain an almost modest demeanor and seem less likely, for one reason or another, to perform the act of murder. The classifications of a black widow and an angel of death fit this description.

The second category, “pistols”, are lurid and fierce. It is a category archetype which males have historically dominated, however, it encompasses women whom are seen to possess more violent and sudden murder tendencies, characteristics often reserved for the description of male killers. This includes women who kill for profit or crime, those who might be out for revenge, a team killer, and the very few that fall into the category of a sexual predator.

Finally, considering the sensitive nature of the human mind as a whole, there must exist an “other” category for those crimes perpetrated without a clear set of commonalities. This includes the female killers whose crimes seem to be the lone result of a question of sanity or those which are unexplainable or unsolved in some manner.

### *Tiptoe Serial Killer*

*Type I.* A Black Widow is a female serial murderer known as a victim-specific murderer as she kills only those with whom she has a personal relationship regardless of any demographic factors. Often, this is a spouse, child, or other close family member, but the person does not necessarily have to be related by blood. She typically takes her first life around age twenty-five and is able to kill for a long period of time before being apprehended or stopping on her own. She is organized and calculated so that her spree may continue for a while without being considered as a potential suspect by the police. Six to eight victims is typical. She is not violent in nature and so the most common method of attack is a lethal dose of poison (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998). Hale and Bolin (1998) report that the most common poison used is arsenic because it is “nearly undetectable when mixed with hot food or drinks” (p. 39). Due to the closeness of the relationship, the victim is an unassuming target for a killer who often desires profit. It is not sought in vain, however. She often feels the wealth is owed to her and thus feels no remorse for the course of her actions. This cold nature and complete disregard for any

personal relationship which has developed makes the Black Widow one of the scariest female murderers of all (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998).

Amy Gilligan opened her own nursing home in Connecticut in 1901. She convinced five of the elderly men to marry her and then killed them for their life insurance sums. In addition, she murdered several elderly women she had convinced to name her as the beneficiary on their wills. For all of the murders, she used poison to kill them. She was eventually discovered when a victim autopsy showed proof of the poisoning (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998, pp. 30-31).

*Type II.* "It is the Angel of Death who invariably presides over the manner and time in which we all must relinquish that which we treasure most" (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998, p. 59). She is not overly confident in her strength and abilities against just anyone. She is emotionless in her pursuit of death as she preys on the young, weak, elderly, ill, an overall defenseless population. She is typically employed in the medical profession in a low-key vocation where she can exist virtually unnoticed. Despite taking the vow to be a caretaker, she instead is a life-taker. Particularly alarming is the number of victims capable of being killed before anyone notices. Despite the localized nature of the killings, it is possible to attribute the deaths to normal day-to-day occurrences in most cases. Similarly to the Black Widow, the Angel of Death is not violent in her killings. Again, poison is favored, but careful strangulation may also be used. Though some killers might contend they have been sent by God to afford mercy on ailing souls, at the heart of a majority of these Angels of Death is a desire to kill and to have sadistic power over others. She determines who lives to see another day and who has woken up to their last sunrise. For this reason, the Angels of Death may as greatly feared as the Black Widow typology (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998).

Genene Jones was a classic example of an Angel of Death. Between 1978 and 1982, Jones worked at the Bexar County Medical Center Hospital in San Antonio, Texas. She was only charged for four murders, but it suspected in over forty other cases. All of her victims were children which she lethally injected with muscle relaxers and anticoagulants. Her motive was power and control (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998, pp. 62-65).

### *Pistol Serial Killer*

The “pistol” category encompasses a wider variety of female killers. These ladies seem scarier in context, biologically lethal and dangerously in charge. Their characteristics and styles are more exceptional. They are cunning and motivated in different ways than our “tip-toe” killers, but clearly dangerous in their own right.

*Type I.* A sexual predator is a type of hedonistic serial killer whose killings are sexually deviant in some way. Typically men, but some women, fall into this typology and may also be known as lust killers. This typology can be rather difficult to explain, but fascinating in its own right as much of what we know discusses the psychological aspects as opposed to finding common killing techniques and other links. Most texts note skewed psychiatric urges, known as paraphilias, drive the sexual satisfaction the killers gain from the deaths of others (Hickey, 1997, p. 17). Some murderers may become aroused by the actual killing while others gain sexual gratification as a result of the dead bodies, i.e. necrophilia (p. 18). Lust is the most common psychological focus of the sexual predator, but power and aggression also motivate the mind and help to explain why many killers display violent murders and odd storage techniques for the corpses. Ramsland (2006) writes that psychologist A. J. Cooper believes early sexual encounters, as well as hyper sexuality is the specific motivation for females (p.17). Ramsland (2006) also observes that most sexual predators find a way to justify and rationalize the murders

in some way (p.12). As previously mentioned, the label of a sexual predator is not typically reserved for a female, however, there have been a few of this typology such as the spotlighted female in my case study later in this exploration, Aileen Wuornos.

*Type II.* Serial killings by women out for revenge are also rather scarce in nature.

Kelleher and Kelleher (1998) explain this phenomenon easily, “Because the crime of serial murder incorporates a discrete cooling-off period between homicides, the familiar emotional characteristics of revenge do not easily translate into sustainable motivation for aggression over a long period of time” (pp. 85-86). The emotional feeling of revenge then must come and go several times and be severe enough to induce murderous behavior over and over again. Her tactics are likened to those of the Black Widow. She uses poison or suffocation in order to prolong the pain, but reacts in a quicker manner overall. There is less planning involved due to the strong emotional response and thus, she is more susceptible to being caught. A revenge killer is usually younger, in her twenties, at the time of the first kill, and the killings do not last as long (Kelleher and Kelleher, 1998, pp. 85-87).

Martha Ann Johnson, of Georgia, was deemed responsible for the death of her four children over a period of five years. By age 22, Johnson was on her third marriage, and it was also failing. The bitter relationship with her current husband is supposedly what drove her to murder her four children. She killed them by rolling over on them until they suffocated. The first three children were young and their deaths were ruled accidental by cause of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. With the death of her fourth child, age eleven, the police ordered an autopsy and discovered the cause of death was asphyxia. They pressed no charges until 1990 when the police had discovered enough evidence (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998, pp. 89-91).



*Type III.* Despite strong similarities with the Black Widow typology, women who specifically kill for crime or profit are given a typology all their own. The differences probe their motives and their victim selection. While some might question a Black Widow regarding her reason for killing, those who kill for crime or profit are obvious in their desires. Most of these women desire financial gains and liken their success to climbing the corporate ladder in a business setting (Kelleher and Kelleher, 1998, pp. 93-94). Holmes, Hickey, & Holmes (1998) describe this woman as a comfort killer. Material gains motivate her to murder (p. 66). Also, those females who murder for crime or profit tend to venture outside the familiar victim territory of the family (Kelleher and Kelleher, 1998, pp. 93-95). Her crimes are well planned and executed so as to take the greatest gain. Kelleher and Kelleher (1998) call this type of serial killer “a fearsome predator because of her intense motivation and highly dispassionate approach towards murder (p. 96). Again, poison is favored but she is not against using a more violent technique if that is what it takes to complete the mission. Kelleher and Kelleher (1998) demonstrate the favored method is a tie between starvation and multiple methods (p. 96). Patient and mature, the business oriented profit killer averages no less than twenty-five years of age as the time of their first homicide. There are discrepancies over the average number of victims, but we know that the killing sprees of profit oriented serial killers are usually shorter term than Black Widows because sometimes they are less careful in obtaining their profit than they are in carrying out the killing in the first place (Kelleher and Kelleher, 1998, pp. 94-96).

Madame Popova was a particularly efficient serial murderer. From 1879 to 1909, she operated a business in Russia in which she made money by killing other women’s’ husbands. For a specified amount of money, she would poison the man in order for the unhappy wife to both get rid of their husband and collect insurance money. A former client finally tipped the

police off to Popova's deadly business and she was put to death in 1909 (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998, pp. 103-104).

*Type IV.* Another rather common type of female serial killer is one that kills in a team. Kelleher and Kelleher (1998) identify this as a "woman who systematically murders others or participates in the systematic murder of others in conjunction with another person" (p. 107) and approximate that one in three female murderers may act in a team. In addition, they identify three common teams that have emerged male/female, multiple females, or a family team (Kelleher and Kelleher, 1998, p. 107). The male/female team is the most frequent team of killers. Though the male is typically considered the dominant force behind the killings, the female will often be heavily involved in the murders as well, during both the planning and the perpetration. The murders are more gruesome in nature and often involve the use of weapons and torture. This killer teams tends to emerge earlier in life with the first killings occurring shortly after the female turn twenty years old. In addition to an earlier start, the duration of the killings is shorter often because of the number of people involved and the volatile relationship that is created. However, the total number of homicides still hovers somewhere around 10-15 victims. The motives tend to be mixed in a team venture. While many male/female teams perform sexual or hedonistic murders, the all female teams are likened to the motives and killings of other non-team female serial killer typologies (Kelleher and Kelleher, 1998, pp. 107-111).

Carol Bundy and Douglas Clark operated as a male/female team for just under three years. The exact number of victims is unknown, but could be as many as fifty. Their motivation was to seek power and sexual gratification from young female victims. Clark performed most of the murders by shooting the victim in the head as she performed oral sex on him. However,

Bundy was charged with at least two murders. Collectively, Clark and Bundy were known as the Sunset Slayer of southern California (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998, pp. 137-139).

### *The “Other” Serial Killer*

As for the next set of female serial killer typologies, the lines become less clear. The “other” category is an elusive mystery to many researchers. Here, we explore murders which seem to miss the typical benchmarks of the already established categories. For one reason or another, the murders don’t follow typical patterns or exhibit the same common qualities of other murderers. First, there is a question of sanity which must be established in order to pursue criminal proceedings. Some instances however, never amass to a case because the murders cannot be solved or explained.

*Type I.* Although some female serial killers have attempted the defense of insanity, in reality, most serial murderers cannot be proven mentally insane. It is an altogether reasonable suggestion that a person must be insane to commit serial murder, as a great majority of the population isn’t capable of even contemplating such a thing. However, differentiating between mental disorders at the time of a murder which may have caused erratic behavior is even more difficult to prove than declaring a person legally insane for life. Some describe this typology of killer as the visionary-type. A woman may have been told by some sort of “voice” that she needed to kill for one reason or another. Sometimes women who kill small children use this defense in a way as to assert that they were ultimately protecting the child from something much more dangerous later in life (Kelleher and Kelleher, 1998, pp. 161-163). Holmes, Hickey, and Holmes (1998) characterize this woman as having a “motivation extrinsic to the personality and comes from an apparition or an auditory hallucination. In such a case, the attack tends to be spontaneous, with the killer selecting a victim predicated upon a description given by the

message-giver” (p. 65). Considering the patterns which have emerged in most serial murder cases (the victim-offender relationships, killing patterns, and careful planning, etc.) this type of homicide is incredibly rare and only a few cases are documented in history.

Bobbie Sue Terrell murdered twelve elderly people in thirteen days in 1984. She possessed an extensive history of mental illness (schizophrenia). She had once tried to murder her young adopted son even. However, she was deemed healthy and hired as a shift supervisor at St. Petersburg North Horizon Health Center in St. Petersburg, Florida where she had started a new life. To this day, it is not clear what triggered her, but Terrell is said to be responsible for 13 poisoning deaths within that hospital. Because of the sensitive nature of her mental capacity however, she was never convicted of all of the murders. Instead, she was sentenced to 65 years in prison for just one of the murders (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998, pp. 167-170).

*Type II.* An unexplainable serial murder case is rare but possible. Kelleher and Kelleher (1998) explain that most murder motives come out once the murderess is caught. However, there are some women who seem wholly unable to come up with a clear motive for her crimes. This can be especially alarming to the public because there is often a vested interest in finding out the motives of the killer in order to understand the crimes better in general as well as to bring closure to the victims’ families and the community. The most unsettling fact about this generic typology is that the murder victims are almost always children (p. 173).

At any one time, there are thousands of murder cases unsolved. Could they be connected? Could there be a serial killer on the loose? If we have learned anything from the serial killers that have been studied already, it’s that it can sometimes be very difficult to spot such a predator. Often, former neighbors and family members confess they never would have expected that they were living with or around a serial killer. Part of what makes so many of

them dangerous is their ability to go undetected for long periods of time. It is unfortunate to say, the very nature of these elusive killers makes it possible for many homicides to go unsolved (Kelleher and Kelleher, 1998, pp.189-190).

### A Case Study

Female serial killers, especially when they act alone, are almost invisible to public view. They are every bit as lethal as male serial murderers are, but we are seldom aware one is in our midst because of the low visibility of their killing” (Hickey, 1997, p. 205). However, beware when the killer is discovered. There is such a media frenzy that surrounds the evolving story of a serial killer. People feed off of drama and stories about extraordinary events. A serial killer is not something we hear about everyday.

They achieve their place in the annals of history’s infamous because the average person is so horrified by what they hear, read or see about them that they must be classified as “freak.” People do not want to believe that the “guy or girl next door” might not be what they seem. But, just as with a traffic accident, we can’t seem to look away (Summerfield, 2008.)

Indeed, we sensationalize their acts by giving them nicknames in society. Aileen Wuornos became known as the “Damsel of Death.” Further, we make celebrities out of both the killer and their victims. The media invades private moments of terror for the victims’ families. What’s more, it provides up to the minute coverage of every detail of the investigation, thus scaring the public even more that the killer is so devious as to avoid being noticed even under such careful scrutiny. “Humans are curious by nature. The media knows and feeds on this curiosity. The consumer or individual must take some responsibility for fostering and encouraging the media to pursue horrific stories” (Summerfield, 2008). Thus, Summerfield

asserts that the very wonderment of human nature may be more to blame for the media's pursuit of the killer's story than for the profit we assume the media makes off of cracking the story.

*Aileen Carol Wuornos (a.k.a. The Damsel of Death)*

"I'd just like to say I'm sailing with the rock, and I'll be back like Independence Day, with Jesus June 6. Like the mother ship and all, I'll be back" (Florida Department of Corrections, n.d., p. 2). These are the final words of one of America's most notorious serial killers. Aileen Wuornos has been incorrectly identified as the "first" female serial killer. While there were not many who came before her, she was not the first and, unfortunately, not the last. What makes Wuornos' story unique, however, is that her killing style was in accord to the style utilized by sexual predators, a typology reserved almost solely for men until that time. The following is an examination of the life and crimes of Aileen Wuornos.

*Background.* Aileen Carol Wuornos was actually born Aileen Pittman in Rochester, Michigan, on February 29, 1956. Her young parents, Diane Pratt and Leo Pittman, separated a few months before her birth. Leo Pittman was a convicted child molester who served time for raping a seven-year-old girl. He was also a diagnosed schizophrenic and later committed suicide while institutionalized. Aileen's mother, Diane Pratt, was unable to handle the stresses of two young children (Aileen had an older brother, Keith). A legal adoption was performed by Aileen's maternal grandparents in March of 1960 (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998, p. 76).

The grandparent's home proved to be no better of a place for Aileen and Keith to grow up. Their grandfather was a raging alcoholic and abusive physically, mentally, a possibly even sexually. He beat both his wife and the children. Aileen's grandmother died in 1971. The cause of death was listed as liver failure, but Diane Pratt strongly believed that her father, Aileen's grandfather, had killed her mother. Aileen and Keith also felt their grandfather's wrath as he had

threatened to kill them several times as well. At only fifteen years of age, Aileen became a ward of the state as her and her brother were put out onto the streets. They had developed a close relationship and Aileen told police, later in life, that she had been sexually involved with Keith at a young age (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998, pp. 76-77).

At fifteen years old, she Aileen dropped out of school and with no real home or future, she turned to a life on the streets. Only a year prior, she had given birth to a son at a Detroit maternity home for unwed mothers. Aileen said that the pregnancy was the result of being raped. She also went on to say that she was raped several more times before turning eighteen in 1974 (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998, p. 77). During those difficult years, people of the neighborhood say she had been living in makeshift camp located in a wooded area at the end of the neighborhood in which she used to live in Troy, Michigan (Broomfield, 2003). Keith died of throat cancer in 1976. His death left her with insurance money of close to \$10,000. In less than two months, the money was gone and she returned to the streets. Late in 1976, Aileen grew unhappy with her surroundings and made her way to Florida through hitchhiking and prostitution (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998, p. 77).

The next few years of Wuornos' life were a blur of run-ins with the law. Before leaving for Florida, she had gotten into trouble for relatively minor offenses and ultimately settled the ordeals with \$105 fine. However, what occurred between 1981 and 1990 could not be solved with only \$105. On June 30, 1983, Wuornos was released from a 13-month prison sentence she served for an armed robbery of a convenience store in 1981. In 1984, Wuornos was arrested on charges of trying to pass forged checks. In 1985, and under the alias of Lori Grody, Wuornos was suspected in the theft of a pistol and ammunition in Pasco County, Florida. Less than two weeks later, she was ticketed for driving without a valid license. She was still using the Grody

alias. Early in 1986, her alias was discovered when she was arrested for auto theft, resisting arrest, and obstruction by false information. Her alias then changed to Susan Blahovec when she was caught speeding later that year.

While Aileen resided in Florida, she married a seventy-year-old man, but the marriage lasted only a few months. After the divorce, Wuornos attempted suicide. She attempted a few more unsuccessful heterosexual relationships before developing a relationship with Tyria Moore in 1986 (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998, pp 77-78). The romantic relationship did not last more than a year, but the two were dear friends and remained companions (“Serial Killers: A Short History,” p. 21). Wuornos apparently drug Moore into her law-breaking habits as the two began getting in trouble together. A bar fight in 1987 landed them both at the police station for questioning. Then, in 1988, using a final alias, Cammie Marsh Green, Wuornos confronted a bus driver on assault charges (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998, p. 78). Wuornos grew increasingly bitter and violent. Moore later described that she began to prefer robbing men at truck stops and bars to prostituting. She grew disgusted with men and the rapings she claimed to have endured for years. Another red flag, she began carrying a gun at all times (“Serial Killers: A Short History,” p. 21).

*The Killings.* It all began with a man named Richard Mallory. Mallory owned an electronics shop in Clearwater, Florida. On December 1, 1989, a Volusia County officer found his vehicle abandoned (“Florida Department of Corrections,” p. 2). An investigation began, but the apparent abduction did not shock many, as the man was known to pick up prostitutes often (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1998, p. 79). Two men scavenging for scrap metal, found the body of the 51-year old man near Interstate 95 in Florida on December 13, 1989 (Reynolds, 1992, pp. 4-5). He had been shot three times in the chest with a .22 caliber pistol (“Serial Killers: A Short



History,” p. 21). The murder had not yet been solved when another man turned up dead in the same area.

An unidentified nude body was discovered forty miles north of Tampa on June 1, 1990. After examining dental records and a missing/endangered person record out of Sarasota, the body, which had been shot six times with a .22 caliber pistol, was identified as that of David Spears, 43 (“Serial Killers: A Short History,” p. 21). Spears was a Winter Gardens Construction heavy machine operator and had been last seen by his coworkers on May 19 (Reynolds, 1992, p. 49). Meanwhile, another missing persons report had been filed for a 40-year-old man traveling I-75 from Boonesville, Missouri to Tampa, Florida.

The body of Charles Carskaddon was found June 6, 1990 about thirty miles from the Spears murder scene. Again, the body was naked and he had nine bullet wounds in the lower chest and upper abdomen from a .22 caliber pistol. Carskaddon had been traveling from a part-time rodeo job in Missouri to meet his fiancé in Tampa (“Serial Killers: A Short History,” p. 21). The day after the body was found, Carskaddon’s abandoned Cadillac was found and several items were reported stolen from it. Among the most interesting of items, a .45 automatic was missing (Reynolds, 1992, p. 54).

A missing persons report was filed for Peter Siems, 65, on June 22, 1990. Siems was a retired sea merchant, but an active missionary. He was last seen on June 7, 1990, just before he left his home in Jupiter, Florida to visit some relatives in Arkansas. On July 4, 1980, his 1988 Pontiac Sunbird was discovered in a field. It was heavily damaged and missing its license plate. The vehicle identification number identified Siems as the owner, but his body was never found. When the police investigated the vehicle they found several blood stains on the upholstery and inside the trunk (Reynolds, 1992, pp. 55-57).

On July 30, 1990, Eugene “Troy” Burress was reported missing after he failed to return from a delivery for the Ocala sausage factory where he worked. His delivery van was found the next day twenty miles east of Ocala near Highway 40, but his body was not found until August 4, 1990. He was discovered about eight miles from the site of his van near the Ocala National Forest with two gunshot wounds again from a .22 caliber pistol, one in the back and one in the chest. Police discovered that only his wallet and identification were missing (Reynolds, 1992, pp. 60-65).

Charles “Dick” Humphreys was a retired Air Force major and former Alabama police chief. In September 1980, Humphreys was working on relocating from Sumterville, Florida to Ocala, Florida where he was working for the Florida Health and Rehabilitative Services Department investigating child abuse. Just one day after celebrating his thirty-fifth wedding anniversary, on September 12, 1990, Humphrey’s body was discovered ½ mile from I-75 in an abandoned subdivision. He had been shot six times at close range with a .22 caliber pistol. Police discovered his car, wallet, and identification also missing.

The last victim in this string of murders was Walter Gino Antonio, 60. Antonio drove trucks for a living and was headed up to Birmingham, Alabama for a new assignment. On November 19, 1990, his body was found off of I-19 in Dixie County. He had been shot four times, three in the back and one execution style in the head. Five days later, Antonio’s Grand Prix turned up near his home in Brevard County, some 215 miles from where his body was found (“Serial Killers: A Short History,” p. 22).

*The Investigation.* By the time the Walter Antonio’s murder appeared in the media, the phrase “serial killer” was running rampant. It was impossible to ignore the close proximity of the murders as well as the similarities in victim demographics and murder wounds. The

spontaneity of the murders and the apparent lack of a visible relationship between any of the victims led police to believe a serial killer was operating in their area. Captain Steve Binegar of the Marion County Sheriff's Criminal Investigation Division was first to hypothesize that a female might be the perpetrator behind the murders. There weren't many who were quick to support this idea, but one key piece of evidence that supported his idea. All of the men had clearly picked up a hitchhiker. In this day and age where trust doesn't come easy, the hitchhiker would have had to appear as non-threatening as possible to the men. Call it stereotypical, but the hitchhiker would have had to be a woman. Binegar even had an idea of who the perpetrator(s) could be.

Earlier in the day on July 4, 1990, an elderly couple from Orange Springs, Florida, near the Ocala Forest, witnessed an accident involving what was later determined to be Peter Siem's Pontiac Sunbird. The couple described two ladies who emerged from the vehicle bloody and outraged. Then, they quickly drove the damaged vehicle out of sight. After the accident and the retrieval of the vehicle, the police put out an alert regarding Siems as a missing person. Then, they gave the public a description of the two women seen exiting the vehicle, thus linking them to the homicide investigation(s). Aileen Wuornos and longtime girlfriend Tyria Moore were the two women portrayed in the police sketches. This was one of their largest mistakes and from then on, it was only a matter of time before Wuornos was caught.

By mid-December, the police were doing heavy investigation on two women, Tyria Moore and another woman, the dominant partner in the couple, who seemed to have many aliases. A check of Tyria Moore's background came up clean. The police then ran information for Cammie Marsh Green and Susan "Lee" Blahovec. Blahovec was the alias that Wuornos used back in the 80's, but received only a speeding violation under that name. Cammie Marsh Green

came back clean for criminal activity as well. However, the police had begun to check out local pawnshops to see if the perpetrator had pawned any of the items stolen from the homicide victims. The Greene ID popped up when it was discovered that a few items from both Richard Mallory and David Spears were pawned for cash. The real breakthrough came when the police found a pawnshop receipt with Greene's thumbprint on it. After running the print in Volusia County, a match was found for a Lori Grody. In addition, Lori Grody's fingerprints were found in Peter Siem's vehicle as well. All of a sudden the pieces came together and the one name that finally emerged was Aileen Wuornos (MacLeod, pp. 15-16).

Shortly after the police sketches emerged on television, Tyria Moore separated from Wuornos in the hopes that she wouldn't be drug into the mess. Moore was never involved in any of the murders and Wuornos had actually only told her about one of the men, Richard Mallory. Moore knew that there were more after that, but they never discussed what Wuornos was doing (MacLeod, p. 17). In an effort to lay low, Moore had moved back to Pennsylvania to live with her sister. Wuornos stayed around Port Orange, Florida where she and Moore had lived for a little over a year. Two undercover officers were sent to perform a closer investigation on Wuornos. The lid was almost blown off the case when the Port Orange police attempted to arrest Wuornos. However, there were six other jurisdictions working together to seal the Wuornos case and so, the Port Orange police retreated upon their command. The two undercover agents continued, but again the case was almost blown by sloppy police work. Using a new approach, the Marion County Sheriff's office finally arrested Wuornos on January 6, 1991, outside "The Last Resort" bar, but only confronted her on an outstanding warrant for a weapons violation under the alias of Lori Grody (p. 16).

After the arrest, the police were able to locate Tyria Moore. They bargained with her, said she wouldn't be in any trouble if she aided them in Wuornos' take down. She agreed, and on January 14, 1991, a call went out to Wuornos in jail. Moore voiced her fears of being blamed for the murders. She told Wuornos that the police were even questioning her family. They hoped to play on Wuornos' sympathies towards Moore. Did she love her enough to confess? Wuornos voiced concern that her conversations were being recorded and she continued to allude to things, but she would not fully confess. The police needed a solid confession to seal the case. Finally, after three days and eleven phone calls, Wuornos exasperated by the whole ordeal, confessed to the murders saying she would do anything to keep Moore out of trouble (MacLeod, p. 17).

WUORNOS: Tyria. Don't...There's no reason. You didn't do anything! I am the one. I am the one who did everything. And I'm gonna let them know this alright?

MOORE: Okay.

WUORNOS: And I'll probably die of a broken heart or a hear attack. I probably won't live long, but I don't care. Hey, by the way, I'm gonna go down in history. Yep. I'll be like Bundy.

(Reynolds, 1992, pp. 184-185)

Aileen Wuornos spent the next three hours and twenty minutes confessing to the murders. All seven murders, however, she claimed were acts of self-defense (p. 195).

*The Trial.* Before a trial even took place, Aileen's attorney's contrived a plea agreement. She would plead guilty to six murder charges (since the body of Peter Siem's was never found, they did not immediately pursue a charge for his supposed death) and receive six consecutive life sentences. Considering the grievous nature of the situation, however, the state sought the death penalty and so, on January 14, 1992, Aileen Wuornos went to trial for the murder of Richard Mallory. As if a taped confession was not bad enough for Wuornos' case, in Florida, there is a law known as the Williams Rule. Under that law, evidence from other crimes is allowed to be

admitted if it shows a pattern. Because of that, evidence of the other five murders were admitted, thus crushing any self-defense defense contentions. In addition, her own testimony in court discredited her defense. Her recollection of events changed continuously and the judge showed no mercy for her evolving sob story. On January 27, 1992, a jury found Aileen Wuornos guilty of first-degree murder. Four days later, in a sentencing hearing, Wuornos was sentenced to die by the electric chair (MacLeod, pp. 18-19).

For the remainder of the murder charges, Aileen Wuornos waived her right to a trial by jury. She plead no contest to the murders of Dick Humphreys, Troy Burrell, and David Spears on March 31, 1992. On May 15, she was given three additional death sentences as a result. In June of that same year, she plead guilty to the murder of Charles Carskaddon and received the death penalty in November for that charge. Finally, in February 1993, she plead guilty and was sentenced to death for the murder of Walter Gino Antonio.

*Death.* Aileen Wuornos claimed several times that the murders were a result of self-defense. On numerous occasions, she cried out that she was raped and sodomized by the men and that they deserved every last bit of the punishment that they received. Upon receiving her first guilty charge for the death of Richard Mallory, she screamed at the jurors, "I'm innocent! I was raped! I hope you get raped! Scumbags of America!" (MacLeod, p. 19). In November of 1992, NBC reported that Mallory had rape charges filed against him and that he had served 10 years in prison on sexual assault charges. An interview between police and Mallory's girlfriend, at the time of the murder, was not used by the defense because she had claimed he was always gentle with women and had never had any violent charges against him such as those suggested by Wuornos' perception of his behavior. The police had failed to discover these charges prior to the trial. Wuornos brought this up in a later appeal, perhaps hoping for a retrial, but was denied

because the evidence was insufficient to overrule the premeditated nature of the Mallory murder as well as evidence of the subsequent murders used against Wuornos under the Williams Rule (“Serial Killers: A Short History,” p. 23)

The appeal process for Aileen Wuornos began in 1994 in the Florida Supreme Court. Wuornos mental status was evaluated. The defenses’ psychologists alleged Wuornos suffered from borderline personality disorder. They also charged that she had brain damage as a result of a violent and drug and alcohol filled adolescence. They believed this caused her impairment in her decision-making at the time of the murders. The States’ psychologists also confirmed belief that Wuornos had borderline personality disorder and impaired judgment capabilities. However, the State determined that these factors could be used as mitigating evidence, but was not severe enough to allow Wuornos to use an insanity defense (*Wuornos v. State of Florida*, 1994).

As a major issue in her first appeal, Aileen Wuornos expressed dissatisfaction with the way the State used the Williams Rule to admit evidence of the other murders. The evidence was admitted to pursue the premeditation factor to the murders. The court agreed that the State was lawful in providing the evidence for this reason because it had to refute the statements made by Wuornos that the murders were performed in self-defense. In addition, she contested the juror instruction of what “cold” premeditated murder was in relation to that evidence. Of the eight major issues addressed in the appeal (one even suggesting the constitutionality of the death penalty), none were recognized by the Florida Supreme Court as being valid and/or able to overturn the decision of the lower court (*Wuornos v. State of Florida*, 1994). In the concurring opinion, J. Kogan expressed his acknowledgement of Wuornos’ less-than-ideal upbringing and overall victimization by the circumstances of life, but he declared, “...social awareness does not dispose of the strictly legal issues.”

In two subsequent appeals filed on Wuornos' behalf (1995 and 1996), the Florida State Supreme Court again upheld the death sentences for Aileen Wuornos. After an unsuccessful petition for a Writ of Habeas Corpus in 2001, Wuornos fired all of her counsel, officially gave up on the appeals process, and volunteered for execution. Towards the end of her time on Death Row, Wuornos became very strange. In the documentary by Nick Broomfield (2003), she often jockeyed between the idea of the murders being in self-defense or in cold blood even though she finally admitted in 2001 that she had not performed in self-defense but rather "hated human life." She became paranoid that the correctional facility staff was attempting to control her brain somehow. This led to appeals on her behalf claiming mental incompetency. Governor Jeb Bush, of Florida, allowed a final psychological evaluation of Wuornos in early October, 2002. After they concluded she understood the ramifications of her actions and what she had done, Bush signed her death warrant.

Aileen Carol Wuornos was executed on October 9, 2002 by lethal injection. Her final words, as expressed at the beginning of this study, reveal a lot about one of America's most infamous serial killers. Since being convicted, she claimed to have developed a better relationship with God. She expressed several times that she believed she needed to die because she had done something wrong in the eyes of the Lord. However, there is an odd reflection of instability by claiming that she would "be back" "like the mother ship." Perhaps 10 years of living with the burden of her crimes finally pushed her over the edge.

*A Media Frenzy.* The media loved the story of Aileen Wuornos. Films, books, and even an opera were created from the thrilling tale of tragedy, lust, and murder that was her life. The 2003 hit film *Monster*, starring Charlize Theron, won an Academy Award for the portrayal of Wuornos' life. Though slightly skewed in its representation of the story, it was an honest



attempt at the truth. The opera, entitled *Wuornos* by Carla Lucero, is an even more twisted representation of the life of the female killer. On the website for the opera (<http://www.wuornos.org/>), Aileen Wuornos is characterized as “the victim of a twisted psyche that resulted from years of abuse.” Lucero charges, “*Wuornos* challenges these knee-jerk prejudices and asks audiences to reexamine abuse and exploitation and their effects.” Because she was inaccurately labeled the “first” female serial killer by some, the popularity of *Wuornos*’ story was blown sky high. Moreover, it was the unique nature of her crimes which sensationalized her story.

### Conclusion

There are a number of irregularities to reveal about the serial murders of Aileen Wuornos. First, both her total number of murders (seven) and her total killing time (roughly one year) are much less than what is typically considered of a serial murderer. As I previously wrote, the average number of deaths is 17 (Hale and Bolin, 1998, p. 55), and the average killing span is 5-6 years (pp. 37-38). Second, she is the only female in history to be considered a sexual predator type of serial killer. It is interesting to note, however, that her perceived mental instability could have allowed her to fit into another typology, the mentally insane. In addition, her spiteful attitude towards men overall might even allow her to be classified within the revenge serial killer typology. Third, she had no established relationship with her victims. They all appeared to be random killings. Whereas, we know that most often, there is a strong victim/offender relationship. Holmes, Hickey, & Holmes (1998), said that the female often targets children and other family members (p. 64). Finally, while most females prefer poisoning as the killing method (Hale and Bolin, 1998, p. 55), Aileen Wuornos violently shot all of her victims in a display of rage not typically associated with a woman.

The story of Aileen Wuornos is one that is certain to be revisited throughout history because it taught us that we can never be too comfortable with what we consider to be the norm. With the addition of her chilling tale of seven gruesome murders one right after another, everything we already thought we knew about female serial killers transformed. It is a chilling reminder that there is a new and changing predator on the loose.

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